



Fr Francis O'Neill, S.J.

(1928-2011. In Zambia 1956-1998)

6 April 2011

Fr. Frank O'Neill was born on 11 July 1928 to Michael and Margaret (O'Donovan) O'Neill in Eyeries village on the Beara Peninsula in County Cork. He did his early education in the area and then went to the Jesuit run Mungret College near Limerick for his secondary schooling. In his youth he was called 'Ollie' short for Oliver.

Frank entered the Jesuit novitiate at Emo Park in 1948. After completing his philosophy studies in Dublin in 1956, Frank was sent to Northern Rhodesia for regency. During his three years here, he studied chiTonga and taught at Canisius College in Chikuni. He returned to Ireland for theology and was ordained in 1962. Following tertianship in 1964, he returned to Zambia and began his many years of pastoral service for the people of the Monze diocese.

While Frank was doing theology, Arthur Cox, a famous Dublin solicitor, on retirement requested the Archbishop of Dublin to accept him for the priesthood. The Archbishop asked James Corboy, the rector of Milltown Park to take Cox, who was 71 years old and a widower, for his theological studies. Corboy reluctantly agreed and asked Frank to take charge of Cox. In his book, *Arthur Cox 1891-1965*, Eugene McCague writes, "That Arthur fitted so well into Milltown is a tribute to his own determination and resourcefulness but is also thanks, in no small measure, to the friendship of one particular fellow scholastic, Frank O'Neill." Frank, as Cox's 'guardian angel' "fulfilled [the role] with great devotion and understanding." After his ordination in 1963, Cox followed Frank (and Bishop Corboy) to Zambia. He died tragically following a car accident on the Namwala road in 1965 and was buried in Chikuni.

Frank's life was marked by hard work, in difficult circumstances and little rest or comfort in the rural areas of Zambia. There were bad roads, poor housing, makeshift churches, basic food and the task of communicating the Gospel in another language. It was characteristic of Frank to take all this in a spirit of optimism and buoyancy. He was blessed with a cheerful and outgoing nature which helped him make friends wherever he went. It also helped him make little of the difficulties and frustrations which were inevitable. His lifetime of work in Zambia was nothing short of heroic.

Frank's first assignment was Namwala where he worked for two years; then Kasiya for another two years. In 1968 he was missioned to Chivuna where he served as parish priest for the next fourteen years. He took a year away from Zambia in 1982-1983, studying pastoral theology at Regis College in Toronto. He thoroughly enjoyed his sabbatical, especially the stimulus of studying theology and the companionship of a larger Jesuit community.

When he returned, he was assigned to Namwala parish as the parish priest and superior of the community. He served the people of Namwala for the next ten years. His final posting in Zambia was in 1993 to Nakambala parish in Mazabuka. After all the years working in very rural parishes, with numerous outstations over rough roads, he found the work in Nakambala pleasant and less taxing.

However, late in 1997 while driving outside Mazabuka, he ran off the road and hit a tree. Although he was not injured in the accident, there was concern that dizziness or a blackout might have been the cause of the accident. He returned to Ireland for a rest

and to have his health examined. He was given medication for high blood pressure which seemed to have been the cause of his other problems.

Frank was sent to work in the Crescent Church in Limerick. He quickly settled into the work of the Church saying Mass, hearing confessions, taking care of callers, directing a Legion of Mary gro

up and offering days of recollection. He was happy that he had returned to Ireland while he was still in good health and able to do some work. In 2000 he was appointed the superior of the community in Limerick.

In 2006 the Church and community in Limerick were closed. Frank continued for a short time with a chaplaincy in Limerick and in 2007 he was sent to Gardiner Street in Dublin. With his health deteriorating, he was sent to the Irish Province Infirmary in 2008 where he died on 6 April 2011.

Frank will be remembered in Zambia for his zealous apostolic work among the rural Tonga of the Monze Diocese. His vibrancy, his optimism, his welcome smile were wonderful characteristics giving hope and support to many people over many years.